

Recognition and Validation

Case Study: Kuona Trust - supporting visual arts in Kenya

Location: Nairobi, Kenya

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Introduction

Kuona Trust is a not-for-profit organisation set up in 1995 to promote, support, innovate and research contemporary visual art in Kenya and East Africa, by nurturing local talent through providing studio space, international exchange, workshops, residency programmes, exhibitions and outreach projects.

Kuona's mission is 'to provide skills and opportunities to artists and to make art a valued and integral part of the society'.

Kuona is the only Trust of its kind in Kenya and has worked with more than 900 artists in the 12 years of its existence. It offers visual artists much needed services and opportunities to improve their artistic practice. Kuona Trust is housed within the GoDown Arts Centre, a multi-arts space that brings together various art forms, from the visual arts to dance, acrobatics and music recording.

Most artists in Kenya are self-taught and, for many, the only form of training that they have received is through the Kuona Trust's technical workshops programme. This programme runs skills-based workshops through which artists learn various artistic techniques from well established artists and art teachers. The majority of artists in Kenya are painters and sculptors, but there are also some printmakers. Conceptual artists, or artists working with new media such as video or installation, are rare.

Places for artists to display their work are quite limited, especially for contemporary artists. There is a strong crafts and tourist-driven market, and there are many spaces that cater for this. However, for contemporary visual artists, creating original artworks, the spaces are few and far between.

The main difficulty in Kenya is the lack of an informed art audience; the majority of supporters are expatriates, and local Kenyans and Asians are in a small minority. Kuona holds Open Days after all its activities to encourage the public to view the work in progress, meet and talk to the artists and take an interest in contemporary art.

Activity

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Kuona Trust holds a variety of activities and regular programmes. Through these programmes and activities, listed below, it seeks to educate Kenyan artists, by helping them to improve their practice in the course of training and international exchange, and by giving them exposure through exhibitions, alternative art events such as art demonstrations in public spaces, open days and publicity, both in Nairobi and in the provinces.

Kuona also seeks to expand the existing art audience through educational and outreach programmes, placing art in public spaces and collaborating with other art organisations, in visual art, live arts and music.

The Trust's activities and regular programmes include:

- subsidised studio space for artists;
- library and resource centre with internet access;
- technical workshops to teach artists new art-making and professional skills;
- exhibitions to expose artists and increase audiences;
- international workshops and residencies, where artists from the Global South work alongside Kenyan artists to share skills and exchange ideas;
- artist presentations on a variety of relevant topics;
- open days after art activities for the artists and public to meet;
- outreach and education projects with artists and the local community to demonstrate the value of art;
- site specific public art projects to bring art out of the gallery to the public; and
- networking with other arts organisations locally and internationally, in particular the Triangle Arts Trust network that links artist-led organisations around the world and helps raise funds for international exchange programmes.

Impact

Over the past 11 years most of Kenya's and many of the region's successful, full-time practising artists have come up as a result of receiving the support of Kuona Trust and its programmes. And over the years most Kenyan visual artists have been connected to Kuona either working in the studio space, or participating in the workshops, residencies, exhibitions and outreach projects. It has provided support and opportunities for artists to excel and encouraged the larger Kenyan public to become interested in the visual arts. The Trust has contributed immensely to the region's growing visual arts profile.

Encouraged by public recognition and an expanding market for local art, the number of practising artists has increased. Galleries and exhibition spaces are overwhelmed by applications and with each new event more artists emerge with artworks to display. Collectively, these artists are building the foundations of a unique modern visual heritage.

Take, for example, Kuona Trust's 'Art in the Forest' international workshop in Ngong Forest in 2006. Fifteen artists - ten Kenyan and five international - worked in the forest for two weeks making art out of natural found materials. On the Open Day, over 1,000 members of the Kenyan public visited, more than ever recorded before at a visual arts event. The public interacted with the artists and reclaimed this wilderness space that had

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previously been thought of as too dangerous to visit. Projects like this remove the perception that art is aimed at an elitist audience in a 'white cube' gallery.

Many people believe that there is a direct link between vibrancy of artistic expression and advocacy, democracy and tolerance. By revitalising the cultural community and giving a public voice to the artists, organisations that support and nurture cultural and artistic expressions - such as Kuona - help in the process of social change towards a diverse and democratic society.

Lessons

- The visual arts scene cannot survive without encouraging and developing a local audience for the visual arts.
- Kuona Trust realises that its success depends on responding to the artists' needs, involving artists in decision-making and being able to change and develop with the needs of the artist.
- It has employed a part-time fundraiser and is initiating income generating ideas and more local corporate involvement, but depends largely on donor funding and does not believe that it is possible for a local arts organisation to ever be self-sustainable.
- The international exchange programme is vital for the development of local artists, Kuona's international workshops and residencies both in Kenya and abroad have benefited many local artists and this experience is often a professional breakthrough for these artists.